

# Nutrition Education and Therapy: A Fad?

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A recently released report from the National Academy of Sciences<sup>1</sup> has examined the status of nutrition education in U.S. medical schools, and generally found it wanting. Approximately 60 percent of the schools surveyed offered fewer than 20 hours of nutrition instruction in the undergraduate medical curriculum; even fewer reported offering any instruction at all in health promotion or disease prevention in relation to nutrition.

As patterns of medical practice have shifted from comprehensive care toward specialization and new technology, the development and application of nutrition in clinical practice has also been fragmented. For example, the advent of total parenteral nutrition has revolutionized the care of surgical and burn patients. Appropriate nutritional support is an integral part of the intensive care systems which now enable the survival of many very low birthweight infants. These and other clinical applications remind us daily of the fundamental importance of nutrition to survival and health.

However, these dramatic successes are only part of the

picture. Much less attention has been paid to issues of diet and disease prevention. The essential roles that diet plays in influencing the incidence of atherosclerosis, cancer, osteoporosis, low birthweight, obesity and dental caries have now been well documented. Public health and consumer attention have been focused on these issues and, as a result, physicians in every community are being asked for accurate, sound advice on matters of diet and health.

To equip medical students to meet the demand to provide sound nutritional advice to their patients and to apply the best therapeutic innovations in treating them, the National Academy of Sciences' committee recommended a concerted effort on the part of medical schools and medical accrediting bodies. The committee proposed that the National Board of Medical Examiners establish a mechanism to ensure a broad range of nutrition questions be included in its examinations.

At the same time as increased attention to the role of nutrition in disease prevention and health promotion is occurring, the role of U.S. medical education in helping to meet the health-care needs of developing countries is receiving

increased attention. Eighty-five percent of the infants born in the world are born in developing countries, and face major health problems, of which malnutrition and preventable infectious diseases are the most important. Health care availability is uneven, preventive measures are inadequate, and medical education in many third-world countries is even less primary-care oriented than in some U.S. schools. The American Academy of Family Practice, recognizing the responsibility of U.S. medical education to assist third-world medicine, has recently adopted a resolution to investigate the feasibility of postgraduate fellowship for third-world physicians in U.S. family medicine training programs. As American medical education turns its attention to health problems of developing countries, the importance of nutrition becomes even more obvious.

At the University of Arizona College of Medicine, clinical research and teaching programs are changing to accommodate these needs. The Cancer Center's Division of Cancer Prevention and Control directs several community-based prevention

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trials which focus on the role of vitamin A and related compounds in the prevention of cancer, and pilot work is proceeding on the role of fiber and other dietary factors in the prevention of colon cancer. The Department of Family and Community Medicine operates an Obesity and Nutrition Consultation Unit which provides a clinical research base for the study of obesity and related factors. An active community-based health promotion program in geriatrics, Project Agewell, is providing opportunity for research and teaching in the area of nutrition and aging. Several faculty members are

actively engaged in nutrition research and consultation in developing countries, providing the opportunity for increased awareness of third-world nutrition problems among our students and housestaff.

The National Academy of Sciences' report on nutrition in medical education notes that the upgrading of education in this area requires the endorsement of the principles of preventive medicine, and nutrition in particular, as a necessary part of mainstream medical education. The recent attention to nutrition evidenced by this report is hardly a passing fad, but

rather part of the mainstream. The University of Arizona College of Medicine will continue to be a leader in this area of fundamental importance. ■

#### Reference

1. National Academy Press, Washington, D.C. *Nutrition Education in U.S. Medical Schools*, July 1985.

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